

When the Emperor Was Divine

A NOVEL

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The sign had appeared overnight. On billboards and trees and the backs of the bus-stop benches. It hung in the window of Woolworth's. It hung by the entrance to the YMCA. It was stapled to the door of the municipal court and nailed, at eye level, to every telephone pole along University Avenue. The woman was returning a book to the library when she saw the sign in a post office window. It was a sunny day in Berkeley in the spring of 1942 and she was wearing new glasses and could see everything clearly for the first time in weeks. She no longer had to squint but she squinted out of habit anyway. She read the sign from top to bottom and then, still squinting, she took out a pen and read the sign from top to bottom again. The print was small and dark. Some of it was tiny. She wrote down a few words on the back of a bank receipt, then turned around and went home and began to pack.

When the overdue notice from the library arrived in the mail nine days later she still had not finished packing. The children had just left for school and boxes and suitcases were scattered across the floor of the house. She tossed the envelope into the nearest suitcase and walked out the door.

Outside the sun was warm and the palm fronds were clacking idly against the side of the house. She pulled on her white silk gloves and began to walk east on Ashby. She crossed California Street and bought several bars of Lux soap and a large jar of face cream at the Rumford Pharmacy. She passed the thrift shop and the boarded-up grocery but saw no one she knew on the sidewalk. At the newsstand on the corner of Grove she bought a copy of the *Berkeley Gazette*. She scanned the headlines quickly. The Burma Road had been severed and one of the Dionne quintuplets—Yvonne—was still recovering from an ear operation. Sugar rationing would begin on Tuesday. She folded the paper in half but was careful not to let the ink darken her gloves.

At Lundy's Hardware she stopped and looked at the display of victory garden shovels in the window. They were well-made shovels with sturdy metal handles and she thought, for a moment, of buying one—the price was right and she did not like to pass up a bargain. Then she remembered that she already had a shovel at home in the shed. In fact, she had two. She did not need a

third. She smoothed down her dress and went into the store.

"Nice glasses," Joe Lundy said the moment she walked through the door.

"You think?" she asked. "I'm not used to them yet." She picked up a hammer and gripped the handle firmly. "Do you have anything bigger?" she asked. Joe Lundy said that what she had in her hand was the biggest hammer he had. She put the hammer back on the rack.

"How's your roof holding out?" he asked her.

"I think the shingles are rotting. It just sprung another leak."

"It's been a wet year."

The woman nodded. "But we've had some nice days." She walked past the venetian blinds and the black-out shades to the back of the store. She picked out two rolls of tape and a ball of twine and brought them back to the register. "Every time it rains I have to set out the bucket," she said. She put down two quarters on the counter.

"Nothing wrong with a bucket," said Joe Lundy. He pushed the quarters back toward her across the counter but he did not look at her. "You can pay me later," he said. Then he began to wipe the side of the register with a rag. There was a dark stain there that would not go away.

"I can pay you now," said the woman.

"Don't worry about it," said Joe Lundy. He reached into his shirt pocket and gave her two caramel candies wrapped in gold foil. "For the children," he said. She slipped the caramels into her purse but left the money. She thanked him for the candy and walked out of the store.

"That's a nice red dress," he called out after her.

She turned around and squinted at him over the top of her glasses. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you, Joe." Then the door slammed behind her and she was alone on the sidewalk and she realized that in all the years she had been going to Joe Lundy's store she had never before called him by his name. Joe. It sounded strange to her. Wrong, almost. But she had said it. She had said it out loud. She wished she had said it earlier.

She wiped her forehead with her handkerchief. The sun was bright and she did not like to sweat in public. She took off her glasses and crossed to the shady side of the street. At the corner of Shattuck she took the streetcar downtown. She got off at Kittredge and went into J. F. Hink's department store and asked the salesman if they had any duffel bags but they did not, they were all sold out. He had sold the last one a half-hour ago. He suggested she try J. C. Penney's but they were sold out of duffel bags there too. They were sold out of duffel bags all over town.

. . .

WHEN SHE GOT HOME the woman took off her red dress and put on her faded blue one—her housedress. She twisted her hair up into a bun and put on an old pair of comfortable shoes. She had to finish packing. She rolled up the Oriental rug in the living room. She took down the mirrors. She took down the curtains and shades. She carried the tiny bonsai tree out into the yard and set it down on the grass beneath the eaves where it would not get too much shade or too much sun but just the right amount of each. She brought the wind-up Victrola and the Westminster chime clock downstairs to the basement.

Upstairs, in the boy's room, she unpinned the One World One War map of the world from the wall and folded it neatly along the crease lines. She wrapped up his stamp collection and the painted wooden Indian with the long headdress he had won at the Sacramento State Fair. She pulled out the *Joe Palooka* comic books from under his bed. She emptied the drawers. Some of his clothes—the clothes he would need—she left out for him to put into his suitcase later. She placed his baseball glove on his pillow. The rest of his things she put into boxes and carried into the sunroom.

The door to the girl's room was closed. Above the doorknob was a note that had not been there the day before. It said DO NOT DISTURB. The woman did not open the door. She went down the stairs and removed

the pictures from the walls. There were only three: the painting of Princess Elizabeth that hung in the dining room, the picture of Jesus in the foyer, and in the kitchen, a framed reproduction of Millet's *The Gleaners*. She placed Jesus and the little Princess together face-down in a box. She made sure to put Jesus on top. She took *The Gleaners* out of its frame and looked at the picture one last time. She wondered why she had let it hang in the kitchen for so long. It bothered her, the way those peasants were forever bent over above that endless field of wheat. "Look up!" she wanted to say to them. "Look up, look up!" *The Gleaners*, she decided, would have to go. She set the picture outside with the garbage.

In the living room she emptied all the books from the shelves except Audubon's *Birds of America*. In the kitchen she emptied the cupboards. She set aside a few things for later that evening. Everything else—the china, the crystal, the set of ivory chopsticks her mother had sent to her fifteen years ago from Kagoshima on her wedding day—she put into boxes. She taped the boxes shut with the tape she had bought from Lundy's Hardware and carried them one by one up the stairs to the sunroom. When she was done she locked the door with two padlocks and sat down on the landing with her dress pushed up above her knees and lit a cigarette. Tomorrow she and the children would be leaving. She did not know where they were going or how long they would be gone or who would be living in their house

while they were away. She knew only that tomorrow they had to go.

There were things they could take with them: bedding and linen, forks, spoons, plates, bowls, cups, clothes. These were the words she had written down on the back of the bank receipt. Pets were not allowed. That was what the sign had said.

It was late April. It was the fourth week of the fifth month of the war and the woman, who did not always follow the rules, followed the rules. She gave the cat to the Greers next door. She caught the chicken that had been running wild in the yard since the fall and snapped its neck beneath the handle of a broomstick. She plucked out the feathers and set the carcass into a pan of cold water in the sink.

BY EARLY AFTERNOON her handkerchief was soaked. She was breathing hard and her nose was itching from the dust. Her back ached. She slipped off her shoes and massaged the bunions on her feet, then went into the kitchen and turned on the radio. Enrico Caruso was singing "*La donna è mobile*" again. His voice was full and sweet. She opened the icebox and took out a plate of rice balls stuffed with pickled plums. She ate them slowly as she listened to the tenor sing. The plums were dark and sour. They were just the way she liked them.

When the aria was over she turned off the radio and

put two rice balls into a blue bowl. She cracked an egg over the bowl and added some salmon she had cooked the night before. She brought the bowl outside to the back porch and set it down on the steps. Her back was throbbing but she stood up straight and clapped her hands three times.

A small white dog came limping out of the trees.

"Eat up, White Dog," she said. White Dog was old and ailing but he knew how to eat. His head bobbed up and down above the bowl. The woman sat down beside him and watched. When the bowl was empty he looked up at her. One of his eyes was clouded over. She rubbed his stomach and his tail thumped against the wooden steps.

"Good dog," she said.

She stood up and walked across the yard and White Dog followed her. The narcissus in the garden were white with mildew and the irises were beginning to wilt. Weeds were everywhere. The woman had not mowed the grass for months. Her husband usually did that. She had not seen her husband since his arrest last December. First he had been sent to Fort Missoula, Montana, on a train and then he had been transferred to Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Every few days he was allowed to write her a letter. Usually he told her about the weather. The weather at Fort Sam Houston was fine. On the back of every envelope was stamped "Censored, War Department," or "Detained Alien Enemy Mail."

The woman sat down on a rock beneath the persimmon tree. White Dog lay at her feet and closed his eyes. "White Dog," she said, "look at me." White Dog raised his head. The woman was his mistress and he did whatever she asked. She put on her white silk gloves and took out a roll of twine. "Now just keep looking at me," she said. She tied White Dog to the tree. "You've been a good dog," she said. "You've been a good white dog."

Somewhere in the distance a telephone rang. White Dog barked. "Hush," she said. White Dog grew quiet. "Now roll over," she said. White Dog rolled over and looked up at her with his good eye. "Play dead," she said. White Dog turned his head to the side and closed his eyes. His paws went limp. The woman picked up the large shovel that was leaning against the trunk of the tree. She lifted it high in the air with both hands and brought the blade down swiftly on his head. White Dog's body shuddered twice and his hind legs kicked out into the air, as though he were trying to run. Then he grew still. A trickle of blood seeped out from the corner of his mouth. She untied him from the tree and let out a deep breath. The shovel had been the right choice. Better, she thought, than a hammer.

Beneath the tree she began to dig a hole. The soil was hard on top but soft and loamy beneath the surface. It gave way easily. She plunged the shovel into the earth again and again until the hole was deep. She picked up White Dog and dropped him into the hole. His body

was not heavy. It hit the earth with a quiet thud. She pulled off her gloves and looked at them. They were no longer white. She dropped them into the hole and picked up the shovel again. She filled up the hole. The sun was hot and the only place there was any shade was beneath the trees. The woman was standing beneath the trees. She was forty-one and tired. The back of her dress was drenched with sweat. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and leaned against the tree. Everything looked the same except the earth was a little darker where the hole had been. Darker and wetter. She plucked a leaf from a low-hanging branch and went back inside the house.

WHEN THE CHILDREN came home from school she reminded them that early the next morning they would be leaving. Tomorrow they were going on a trip. They could bring with them only what they could carry.

"I already know that," said the girl. She wore a white cotton frock with tiny blue anchors and her hair was pulled back in two tight black braids. She tossed her books onto the sofa and told the woman that her teacher, Mr. Rutherford, had talked for an entire hour about prime numbers and coniferous trees.

"Do you know what a coniferous tree is?" the girl asked.

The woman had to admit that she did not. "Tell me," she said, but the girl just shook her head no.

"I'll tell you later," said the girl. She was ten years old and she knew what she liked. Boys and black licorice and Dorothy Lamour. Her favorite song on the radio was "Don't Fence Me In." She adored her pet macaw. She went to the bookshelf and took down *Birds of America*. She balanced the book on her head and walked slowly, her spine held erect, up the stairs to her room.

A few seconds later there was a loud thump and the book came tumbling back down the stairs. The boy looked up at his mother. He was seven and a small black fedora was tilted to one side of his head. "She has to stand up straighter," he said softly. He went to the foot of the stairs and stared at the book. It had landed face open to a picture of a small brown bird. A marsh wren. "You have to stand up straighter," he shouted.

"It's not that," came the girl's reply, "it's my head."

"What's wrong with your head?" shouted the boy.

"Too round. Too round on top."

He closed the book and turned to his mother. "Where's White Dog?" he asked.

He went out to the porch and clapped his hands three times.

"White Dog!" he yelled. He clapped his hands again. "White Dog!" He called out several more times, then went back inside and stood beside the woman in the kitchen. She was slicing apples. Her fingers were long and white and they knew how to hold a knife. "That dog just gets deafer every day," he said.

He sat down and turned the radio on and off, on and off, while she arranged the apples on a plate. The Radio City Symphony was performing the last movement of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Cymbals were crashing. Cannons boomed. She set the plate down in front of the boy. "Eat," she said. He reached for a slice of apple just as the audience burst into applause. "Bravo," they shouted, "bravo, bravo!" The boy turned the dial to see if he could find *Speaking of Sports* but all he could find was the news and a Sammy Kaye serenade. He turned off the radio and took another slice of apple from the plate.

"It's so hot in here," he said.

"Take off your hat then," said the woman but the boy refused. The hat was a present from his father. It was big on him but the boy wore it every day. She poured him a glass of cold barley water and he drank it all in one gulp.

The girl came into the kitchen and went to the macaw's cage by the stove. She leaned over and put her face close to the bars. "Tell me something," she said.

The bird fluffed his wings and danced from side to side on his perch. "Baaaak," he said.

"That's not what I wanted to hear," said the girl.

"Take off your hat," said the bird.

The girl sat down and the woman gave her a glass of cold barley water and a long silver spoon. The girl licked the spoon and stared at her reflection. Her head was upside down. She dipped the spoon into the sugar bowl.

"Is there anything wrong with my face?" she asked.

"Why?" said the woman.

"People were staring."

"Come over here," said the woman.

The girl stood up and walked over to her mother.

"Let me look at you."

"You took down the mirrors," the girl said.

"I had to. I had to put them away."

"Tell me how I look."

The woman ran her hands across the girl's face. "You look fine," she said. "You have a fine nose."

"What else?" asked the girl.

"You have a fine set of teeth."

"Teeth don't count."

"Teeth are essential."

The woman began to rub the girl's shoulders. She told the girl to lean back and close her eyes and then she pressed her fingers deep into the girl's neck until she felt her begin to relax. "If there was something wrong with my face," the girl asked, "would you tell me?"

"Turn around," the woman said.

The girl turned around.

"Now look at me."

The girl looked at her.

"You have the most beautiful face I have ever seen."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I mean it."

The boy turned on the radio. The weatherman was

giving the forecast for the next day. He was predicting rain and cooler temperatures. "Sit down and drink your water," the boy said to his sister. "Don't forget to take your umbrella tomorrow," said the weatherman.

The girl sat down. She drank her barley water and began to tell the woman all about coniferous trees. Most of them were evergreens but some were just shrubs. Not all of them had cones. Some of them, like the yew, only had seedpods.

"That's good to know," said the woman. Then she stood up and told the girl it was time to practice the piano for Thursday's lesson.

"Do I have to?"

The woman thought for a moment. "No," she said, "only if you want to."

"Tell me I have to."

"I can't."

The girl went out to the living room and sat down on the piano bench. "The metronome's gone," she called out.

"Just count to yourself then," said the woman.

". . . THREE, FIVE, SEVEN . . ." The girl put down her knife and paused. They were eating supper at the table. Outside it was dusk. The sky was dark purple and a breeze was blowing in off the bay. Hundreds of jays were twittering madly in the Greers' magnolia tree next door. A drop of rain fell on the ledge above the

kitchen sink and the woman stood up and closed the window.

"Eleven, thirteen," said the girl. She was practicing her prime numbers for Monday's test.

"Sixteen?" said the boy.

"No," said the girl. "Sixteen's got a square root."

"I forgot," said the boy. He picked up a drumstick and began to eat.

"You never knew," said the girl.

"Forty-one," said the boy. "Eighty-six." He wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Twelve," he added.

The girl looked at him. Then she turned to her mother. "There's something wrong with this chicken," she said. "It's too tough." She put down her fork. "I can't swallow another bite."

"Don't, then," said the woman.

"I'll eat it," said the boy. He plucked a wing from his sister's plate and put it into his mouth. He ate the whole thing. Then he spit out the bones and asked his mother where they were going the next day.

"I don't know," the woman said.

The girl stood up and left the table. She sat down at the piano and began to play a piece by Debussy from memory. "Golliwogg's Cake Walk." The melody was slow and simple. She had played it at a recital the summer before. Her father had sat in the front row of the audience and when she was finished he had clapped and clapped. She played the piece all the way through with-

out missing a note. When she began to play it a second time the boy got up and went to his room and began to pack.

The first thing he put inside of his suitcase was his baseball glove. He slipped it into the large pocket with the red satin lining. The pocket bulged. He threw in his clothes and tried to close the lid but the suitcase was very full. He sat on top of it and the lid sank down slowly. Suddenly he stood up again. The lid sprang open. There was something he had forgotten. He went to the closet in the hall and brought back his polka-dotted umbrella. He held it out at arm's length and shook his head sadly. The umbrella was too long. There was no way it would fit inside the suitcase.

THE WOMAN STOOD ALONE in the kitchen, washing her hands. The children had gone to bed and the house was quiet. The pipes were still hot from the day and the water from the faucet was warm. She could hear thunder in the distance—thunder and, from somewhere far off in the night, the faint wail of a siren. She looked out the window above the sink. The sky was still clear and she could see a full moon through the branches of the maple tree. The maple was a sapling with delicate leaves that turned bright red in the fall. Her husband had planted it for her four summers ago. She turned off the tap and looked around for the dish towel but it was

not there. She had already packed the towels. They were in the suitcase by the door in the hall.

She dried her hands on the front of her dress and went to the birdcage. She lifted off the green cloth and undid the wire clasp on the door. "Come on out," she said. The bird stepped cautiously onto her hand and looked at her. "It's only me," she said. The bird blinked. His eyes were black and bulbous. They had no center.

"Get over here," he said, "get over here now." He sounded just like her husband. If she closed her eyes she could easily imagine that her husband was right there in the room with her.

The woman did not close her eyes. She knew exactly where her husband was. He was sleeping on a cot—a cot or maybe a bunk bed—somewhere in a tent at Fort Sam Houston where the weather was always fine. She pictured him lying there with one arm flung across his eyes and then she kissed the top of the bird's head.

"I am right here," she said. "I am right here, right now."

She gave the bird a sunflower seed and he cracked the shell open in his beak. "Get over here," he said again.

She opened the window and set the bird out on the ledge.

"You're all right," the bird said.

She stroked the underside of his chin and he closed his eyes. "Silly bird," she whispered. She closed the win-

dow and locked it. Now the bird was outside on the other side of the glass. He tapped the pane three times with his claw and said something but she did not know what it was. She could not hear him anymore.

She rapped back.

"Go," she said. The bird flapped his wings and flew up into the maple tree. She grabbed the broom from behind the stove and went outside and shook the branches of the tree. A spray of water fell from the leaves. "Go," she shouted. "Get on out of here."

The bird spread his wings and flew off into the night.

She went back inside the kitchen and took out a bottle of plum wine from beneath the sink. Without the bird in the cage, the house felt empty. She sat down on the floor and put the bottle to her lips. She swallowed once and looked at the place on the wall where *The Gleaners* had hung. The white rectangle was glowing in the moonlight. She stood up and traced around its edges with her finger and began to laugh—quietly at first, but soon her shoulders were heaving and she was gasping for breath. She put down the bottle and waited for the laughter to stop but it would not, it kept on coming until finally the tears were running down her cheeks. She picked up the bottle again and drank. The wine was dark and sweet. She had made it herself last fall. She took out her handkerchief and wiped her mouth. Her lips left a dark stain on the cloth. She put the cork back into the bottle and pushed it in as far as it would go.

"*La donna è mobile*," she sang to herself as she went down the stairs to the basement. She hid the bottle behind the old rusted furnace where no one would ever find it.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night the boy crawled into her bed and asked her, over and over again, "What is that funny noise? What is that funny *noise*?"

The woman smoothed down his black hair. "Rain," she whispered.

The boy understood. He fell asleep at once. The thunder had come and gone and except for the sound of the rain the house was now quiet. The woman lay awake worrying about the leaky roof. Her husband had meant to fix it but he never had. She got up and placed a tin bucket on the floor to catch the water. She felt better after she did that. She climbed back into bed beside the boy and pulled the blanket up around his shoulders. He was chewing in his sleep and she wondered if he was hungry. Then she remembered the candy in her purse. The caramels. She had forgotten about the caramels. What would Joe Lundy say? He would tell her she was wearing a nice red dress. He would tell her not to worry about it. She knew that. She closed her eyes. She would give the caramels to the children in the morning. That was what she would do. She whispered a silent prayer to herself and drifted off to sleep as the water dripped steadily into the bucket. The boy shrugged off the blanket and rolled up against the wall where it was cool. In a

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few hours he and the girl and their mother would wake up and go to the Civil Control Station at the First Congregational Church on Channing Way. Then they would pin their identification numbers to their collars and grab their suitcases and climb up onto the bus and go to wherever it was they had to go.